Animator Randy Nelson of Aptos is one of the employees of Pizza Time Theater who dreams up the fanciful shows.

This pizza place has lots of character(s)

By Clade Chorness
Valley Journal staff

SUNNYVALE — When executives of Pizza Time Theater Inc. gather in the sleek corporate headquarters here, the talk is of stock options and liquid assets.

But in a large, noisy room near the parking lot, amid a cacophony of workshop sounds, the debate is about piano-playing hippopotami and singing coyotes, not corporate finance.

It's the birthplace of "Chuck E. Cheese" and a cast of trademark characters that perform at Pizza Time Theaters.

Like industrious elves, employees spend their days creating the singing and joking Pizza Time characters that entertain pizza-eating patrons at about 50 franchises around the country and in Australia.

The blend of pizza parlor and Disneyland has brought millions to Pizza Time founder, Nolan K. Bushnell. The company's sales were $12.8 million in the past six months, and when Pizza Time whet public earlier this year, shares were sold at $15 apiece. New theaters include one on Convention Way in Redwood City.

Bushnell already was among the "Who's Who" of Silicon Valley when he opened the first Pizza Time Theater in San Jose in 1977. A pioneer in the electronics field, Bushnell founded Atari and invented Pong, the first electronic video game.

At Pizza Time, it all begins in the cavernous workshop at the headquarters, 1213 Innsbruck Drive. The building is situated among scores of electronics firms. It's easy to spot; it's the one with the sign of a grinning, winking Chuck E. Cheese.

A staff of young employees assembles the robot-like characters on rows of workbenches. The first step is fashioning a skeleton of metal. Next, a suit padded with foam and covered with cloth is fitted.

Then the character's personality is created. It may be a Dollie Dimples, the hippo who plays the piano, or Jasper T. Jowls, the banjo-playing hound dog.

There are 14 characters in all, ranging from a country-western coyote to a quartet of singing "Beagles" with British accents.

On a recent day, employees Jul Kamen and Kathy Wolf were designing Pizza Time's latest character, a rock 'n' roll singing lion called "The King." Clad in a white jumpsuit and seven and a half feet tall, the lion is the largest character Pizza Time has ever made.

Wolf, 23, is wardrobe supervisor. She and Kamen design the creatures down to their jeweled fingers and long eyelashes. They supervise the workshop where the characters are sewn and glued together. The two constantly dream up new ideas for Pizza Time characters.

"We just sit down and brainstorm," Wolf says. "The idea is to create something that will make people laugh."

Wolf, who studied art in college, says with a grin that "I never thought I would be doing this."

The wardrobe department makes about 40 characters a month, in addition to "walk-around" suits worn by Pizza Time restaurant employees. The characters will be purchased by franchises at a cost of $1,000 to $1,500.

The next step is to bring the characters to life. The robots are preprogrammed and computer-operated with a pneumatic, or forced air pressure system. Pizza Time employees call it "cyberamics."

Cyberamics gives the characters eight different movements of the head, eyes, body and ears, says Ed Wartena, production manager.

Once the characters are capable of movement, they are handed over to Mike Hatcher, director of entertainment. Hatcher works at a computer console studded with control buttons that enable him to sychronize the words of songs and skits with the characters' movements.

The painstaking procedure involves playing songs over and over again to perfect the timing of each twist of Chuck E. Cheese's head and every bat of Dolli Dimple's eyelashes.

Hatcher says each minute of the two- and three-minute skits requires at least five hours of work at the consol. He tells visitors that "Nolan Bushnell may be the father of Pizza Time characters, but I'm their mother."

Once Hatcher has done his job, the characters take on a life of their own. Chuck E. Cheese, as master of ceremonies, presides over skits with a sarcastic wit. Harmony Howlette, the country-western coyote, sings with the style of Loretta Lynn.

The overall affect is reminiscent of the elaborate attractions at Disneyland.

"We're doing what Disneyland does, but they have only two places to worry about," Hatcher says. "We are mass producing Disneyland-like characters at one-tenth the price."

Of course, a price is always paid for such efficiencies. No matter how life-like the characters, the fate of Chuck E. Cheese and his kind is the same as a shipment of pizza sauce: a long trip in wooden crates to the purchasing franchise.

Mickey Mouse is handled with a little more dignity.

Valley Journal staff photos by Joe Melena

The newest character is the gigantic rock 'n' roll singer, "The King."

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